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The Editors

LATIN COMPOSITION

(Editorial Note: The paper here printed was originally presented by its author to the Classical Conference, held in Princeton in connection with the Annual Meeting of the Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools of the Middle States and Maryland).

The chief value of Latin composition as a study in secondary schools seems to be often misconceived. In the opinion of many, perhaps of most, the immediate purpose of the study is the acquisition of the power to write Latin, and its value is measured by the degree of facility which is gained. The writing of Latin is regarded either as an end in itself or as a means to an end, that end being the learning of the Latin language. If this be the true view, the best method of teaching Latin composition will probably be that which most quickly teaches the pupil to write Latin. It may be found hard to improve much on the method of old Roger Ascham as laid down in The Schoolmaster.

But suppose this view to be erroneous. Suppose the proper purpose of teaching Latin composition to be only secondarily to teach the pupil to write Latin, or even to help him to learn Latin. It will follow, then, that possibly a method of teaching it may be good and well applied which in an extreme case may leave the pupil unable to write rather simple Latin sentences correctly. It is often the case that tested by examination standards a method appears faulty which yet is pedagogically sound.

A distinction must be drawn between real Latin composition, the writing of original Latin, and what is commonly called Latin composition, the translation of more or less idiomatic English into Latin. The latter is, of course, all that is regularly attempted in schools, and what is now said applies to secondary schools only. If a student pursues the study of Latin

beyond the secondary school stage, both the purpose and the method of study necessarily change. The acquisition and use of the language and the contemplation of its literature must be the ends in view, for a time at least, in college, and the methods of study must be adapted to these ends.

From the Latin standpoint four elements enter into the translation of English into Latin. The first element is a knowledge of Latin words and their English equivalents—the meaning of *videre* and *breviter*, the correspondence between *venire* and "come", the difference between *venire* and *ire*, between *vir* and *homo*—that which we call Vocabulary. The second element is a knowledge of forms and their forces—the difference in force between *homini* and *hominum*—what we call Inflection. The third is a knowledge of the relations of forms of different words to one another, of the laws which sanction a legal union between form and form—whether we should say *invident mihi*, or *invident me*; *imperator militi iubet ut pugnet*, or *militem iubet pugnare*; whether it is right to say *dicat ut venturus est*, or, if not, what is right—that which we call Syntax. Last is a knowledge of the principles of style, if we allow that somewhat elastic term to stand for idiom, often closely related to syntax; for choice between words and synonyms, closely related to vocabulary; for order of words; and for those general considerations which give a composition clearness, force, and elegance. Let us examine these four elements one by one.

It is not the purpose of Latin composition to teach vocabulary. Some years ago the idea was current in certain quarters that in books for the work of the first year in Latin the more words introduced the better. This idea happily never gained great vogue, and now seems to have fewer advocates than formerly. The reasoning was good, but it rested on a false premise. The idea was that an infant learning to speak its vernacular first learns partially and imperfectly a good many words, which later, as it develops, it learns more and more thoroughly and completely. The false premise was that a child of secondary school age should learn a new language—Latin—in the same way he learned English. But the child of fourteen is not the same in mental attributes or mental attitude as the child of two, and needs to learn language in a very different way. If the child of secondary school age were put to the learning of Latin in the same way the infant learns his vernacular, that is, by imitation, he might indeed become proficient in the use of the language; but the bond of connection between the two languages in the process of learning, the interaction, so to speak, be-

tween them, would not exist for him, and it is just that interaction which constitutes a great, perhaps the greatest, benefit of the study of Latin to a secondary school student. The English speaking youth privileged to live with Cicero and converse with him, until he learned to use the Latin language as fluently and as accurately as his master, would nevertheless miss most of the benefit which his friend would gain, who pegged away at translation and composition under a competent teacher.

Our second element is Inflection. This, too, it is not the purpose of Latin composition to teach. What an attempt to write Latin does teach the pupil is that he is ignorant of inflection, and that it behooves him to learn the forms he wishes to use. He wishes to say "for a man"; to write a sentence containing the expression does not teach him the form, nor does it serve much to fix it in the memory after he has learned it. A pupil may be made to remember that *homini* means "for a man" quite as readily when the word is given alone as when it is given with other words in a sentence. Indeed, he may be made more readily to remember; for the principle that things may be taught more easily in connection with one another than separately does not apply when all are equally unknown and strange.

The third element is Syntax, and to teach this is the function of Latin composition, but not merely as syntax, or as an end in itself. It is not to be taught primarily as a means towards the learning of the Latin language, either. Consider how few of those who study Latin reach even a tolerable mastery of it. It is a standing joke that many college graduates cannot read their own diplomas. But have those who have studied Latin without mastering it wasted their time? If it is so, Latin teachers are responsible for a waste of time and energy beyond what can be laid at the door of the teachers of heathen China. If the chief purpose of studying Latin is to learn Latin, then the Latin teaching of this country is beneath contempt.

For what, then, is Latin composition to be taught? Principally as a complement to Latin translation. The most important object of translation from Latin into English is to facilitate English expression (I cordially acknowledge my indebtedness to the arguments contained in Prof. Bennett's excellent work on *The Teaching of Latin*). But there is danger in thus passing from the unfamiliar to the familiar, almost, we may say, from the unknown to the known, of a certain vagueness or diffuseness, of an uncertainty or looseness of expression not conducive to good scholarship or good English. Translation into English becomes after a time partly mechanical. We have all had the experience, over and over again, that after a translation which sounded smooth and glib enough, when we have questioned the pupil as to the meaning, we have found that he had no very clear ideas. Now this is just where Latin composition comes into place. To turn idiomatic English into idiomatic Latin, into Latin which is syntactically correct, the student must absolutely, in the first place, determine the meaning of his English. Then

he must with the most painstaking care adapt this, phrase by phrase, thought by thought, to its Latin form, knowing well that careless or loose thinking on one least point will show a defect in the result. The version into English is like the impressionist's picture; the general effect may be there, but the details may not bear scrutiny. The version into Latin is the miniature on ivory; failure in one detail mars the perfection of the whole. We see from this how far removed the teaching of a vocabulary is from the proper purpose of Latin composition. The cultivation of close and accurate thinking is the chief object of this study. Even if the sentence or the passage never reaches the final stage of a Latin expression, if all the preliminary thinking and adapting be done, the legitimate work of the study has been mainly accomplished.

As to the fourth of our elements, style, we need only say now that it should be taught to some extent, but only as it affects this clearness of thinking, which it is the business of the subject to teach.

From this discussion certain principles as to method come forth. The vocabulary made use of should be small. Until a principle of syntax is thoroughly mastered, and by that we mean until a logical process is thoroughly organized, only the most familiar words should be used. It is probably best that the book used be based as to vocabulary on the text in hand. In this way the two kinds of translation reinforce each other. But even here only the most common words should be chosen. We say, and rightly, that the practice in vogue in the time of our grandfathers of teaching an unknown language, Greek, through the medium of Latin, a language almost equally unknown, was criminal. It is a crime of the same kind to try to teach an unknown principle of syntax through the medium of unknown words. Some otherwise excellent textbooks on Latin composition sin in this respect in their examples and model sentences. The syntactical treatment of the book should be rigorously scientific and systematic. Progress should be, of course, from simpler to more complex constructions, and repetition should be kept up until a point is thoroughly mastered.

The arguments here used of Latin composition apply with almost equal force to Greek composition. With this in mind we may add a word in conclusion about College Entrance Examinations. If the purpose of Latin and Greek composition in secondary schools is as has been stated, colleges are at fault in requiring maximum and minimum requirements in Greek and Latin. But there is one prominent college not far from New York which not only accepts no minimum in Greek, if Greek is offered at all, but requires both elementary and advanced composition. Would not the interests of classical study be at least as well subserved, if candidates offering both Greek and Latin as maxima were allowed to offer as an alternative to advanced composition in one language an extra amount of reading? For example, instead of advanced Greek composition, three additional books of Homer could be presented, or Homer at sight and Herodotus. The machinery for such examinations could be readily provided by the College Entrance Examination Board, but the decision rests with the colleges. At Harvard, those who offer "Advanced Greek" as a subject for examination may omit advanced composition without loss of credit.

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